

# NEWSLETTER

## FROM BEN FREETH

24 SEPTEMBER 2020



I arrived back in Zimbabwe, after getting locked down in the UK, 6 months and 6 days after leaving.

In Zimbabwe it was not lockdown. It had been a time of crackdown - and curfew.

I was struck by the desolate dryness as we drove through the maze of road blocks on the potholes streets. Masked army and police personnel are out in force to ensure no insurrection and to collect bribes - all in the name of Covid-19.

I was struck how even they were thin. Zimbabwe is facing major hunger with estimates of two thirds of the population needing food aid by Christmas.

On the afternoon that I arrived I spoke to Martin Grobler. His farm had been invaded at lunchtime. Twenty-five policemen arrived with guns, and in direct defiance of all international law, human rights instruments and our own SADC Tribunal Judgment, and evicted him. By the end of the weekend he was off. He has over 100 employees who, with their families, will add to the hunger problem this year.

On Monday I went to meet up with the brave, award-winning journalist, Hopewell Chin'ono, and show him some solidarity in the Magistrate's Court after 45 days in the most unimaginable jail conditions.

I managed to get in and find Hopewell. The magistrate was late - as usual - so we had a spare hour or two to chat. He was defiant; but he told me of the conditions he had been kept in: a cell of approximately 7 metres by 4 metres with 44 people. The usual routine of a Zimbabwe jail applied: everyone lay like sardines and when one person in the line turned, everybody had to turn together.

Just so that people in the Western world can visualize it, it's like having 2 rows of 7 single beds all squashed together - and 44 people in those 14 beds. The difference is that it's on a very cold, hard, dirty concrete floor with no pillow - and Hopewell had to share flea ridden, soiled blankets.

In the corner is a bucket for anyone needing the toilet. There's no privacy, no running water, no soap, no detergent, no masks and as for the social distancing required in the rest of the world there is instead desperate and unimaginable overcrowding.

Hopewell's crime was exposing multi-million dollar corruption at the very highest level in a Covid-19 deal.

I chatted to Beatrice Mtetwa too, the award-winning lawyer. She had been due to go to the UK with me in March but had had to cancel at the last minute. I reminded her of when she had got me out of the torture chambers at Harare Central years before and we laughed. You have to laugh.

Beatrice has been prevented by the magistrate from representing Hopewell. The magistrate wants her struck off the legal register so that she cannot represent anyone. Human rights lawyers are persecuted in Zimbabwe.

After several hours the magistrate finally arrived and remanded the case for another month - just to frustrate everyone.

During the week I spent time at *Foundations for Farming*. Here there is tremendous hope! I collected some of the open-pollinated seed grown by MCF for distribution. It's unfortunately down on last year - but there will still be 4,000 families who will be able to feed themselves if they are faithful with the seed we entrust them with.

I also met with Tsitsi Dangarembga - the great novelist and on the Booker prize long-list this year. She had also just been in prison.

I met Advocate Fadzayi Mahere, the main opposition MDC-Alliance spokesperson. She is a wonderful person whom I have known since she was a student. I even visited her at the International Criminal Court in The Hague where she worked as a lawyer for a time. She had carried posters with half a dozen others saying "no" to the awful violence and terrible corruption. She was put in jail for her trouble.

Dave Drury is another remarkable lawyer I have spent much time with this week. He told me of how two of his children had been in jail last month for displaying the anti-corruption and anti-violence placards with Fadzayi. His daughter was let out after a very grim night. His son, Simon, was still in jail three nights later, in similarly appalling conditions to Hopewell.

On the fourth night the paperwork was finally completed for Simon's release but they still wouldn't release him. Simon's lawyer came to the group of family and friends standing in the darkness outside the remand prison and asked them to pray before going back in again.

Simon meanwhile was resigning himself to further incarceration amongst the filth and mass of others. Some of those in the cell had been waiting months for a trial; others years - even up to 14 years in those inhuman cells without trial or any verdict from a court.

Suddenly though Simon was fished out from amongst the sea of fellow inmates.

After the clanking of doors and turning of keys and other formalities he was suddenly out under the magnificent African sky.

It was then that one of the most heart-rending cries I can ever remember hearing, echoed right up to the stars from a little aperture in the dark, fetid and overcrowded "hole" that Simon had just left:

"Simon, don't forget us..."

I could go on. I won't. Please don't forget those prisoners. Please don't forget those that are in the dark holes of Zimbabwe. Please don't forget the suffering ones.



Ben

**Ben Freeth**

Executive Director

All this within four days back in the country.

There are so many injustices that go unnoticed in Zimbabwe. Often it feels overwhelming - how could each and every injustice at this scale be accounted for?

We believe that no one should be left forgotten in Zimbabwe. We believe there must be those that are willing to go upstream - to the source of injustice - to bring hope to those hidden from view.

Our team will continue to voyage upstream but we need your support. At this crucial point for Zimbabwe, please would you consider giving again to the Mike Campbell Foundation to ensure Ben and the team are able to walk where few others dare tread. As a small charity, even a modest gift makes a significant impact in turning the tide in Zimbabwe.

Please follow this [link](#) to see how you can journey with us upstream, and ensure no-one is left forgotten in Zimbabwe.

You can also journey with us through a CAF cheque, Stewardship or personal cheque.